

By SANDY CLARKE
star2@thestar.com.my

MALAYSIAN lecturers Eugene Tee and Tsee Leng Choy have spent years teaching students about their emotions and how the brain functions – and now they present their knowledge in their debut book.

Of Bromances And Biting Cute Babies might be an odd book title, but it points to the complexity of our emotions and the often peculiar attachments and aversions they can invoke in us.

The authors – both senior lecturers at HELP University – have long harboured the desire to present the science of emotions to people in a way that allows them to better understand their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

In an interview with *Star2*, the amiable academics gave their views on emotions and why they feel there's a need for Malaysians to gain a deeper understanding of how they tick.

What was the motivation behind writing your book?

Part of the idea was to start writing a series of books for the general public. We have many people here who know a lot about the psychological sciences, but much of it doesn't get translated for the public. So we wanted to write a book that was accessible and yet remained true and authentic to what the science of emotions has to say.

We both share the goal of having people become accustomed to the word "psychology" and not be taken aback when they hear it. We also wanted to share many of the fascinating insights into emotions we have come across with a wider audience.

Why is there a growing interest in how our minds work – and why is it vital?

Our quality of life has improved drastically and so we're not really focused on survival, we're now focused on "Where do I want to go to eat?" rather than, "Will I have enough to eat?" In this sense, psychology has become more mainstream.

As Asians, we're not as expressive as non-Asians are. There's an attitude here that emotions are disruptive, you're not supposed to feel this way (especially if it relates to mental health issues) and so people hold emotions in until they manifest themselves in a problematic way.

How and why do we feel?

Two lecturers offer a timely, accessible book that opens the door to the world of emotions.

So it's important for people to know how our brains work and why we experience certain emotions, just so they get a better sense that emotions and feelings are normal. Sometimes they can be unpleasant or overwhelming, but we need to be aware of why we feel as we do and to realise that it's OK to have those experiences.

Do Malaysians need greater awareness of their emotions?

Definitely. Being Asian, there's not been a lot of attention focused on emotions. We emphasise cognition – you have to do well in your studies. But now, we're suddenly realising that it's not the full answer.

We really need to understand why emotions are so important, because we're now seeing that a lot of people are experiencing disorders and psychological distress.

The reason behind the stigma (assigned to mental health issues) is because people don't see anything, but when you can show people a picture of a depressed brain, their perspective shifts and it gives the disorder a legitimacy.

What are the differences between emotions, moods, and feelings?

For emotion, we use the term to describe a reactive, situational-dependent response to demands in the environment – it's something that interrupts our cognitive processes. Moods are diffuse, they're a little bit more spread out over the course of a day. Feelings are the subjective elements that come from our emotions or moods.

Do all emotions serve an evolutionary purpose?

If we view emotions from an evolutionary perspective, the key word would be "adaptive". They serve a particular function in the interests of our survival and reproduction.

Not all emotions have been examined from an evolutionary perspective, and there are some where you wonder about their existence. If we take pleasant emotions such as joy and happiness, it took a while before scientists started to piece together the puzzle and ask why it's



Tee (standing) and Choy at their book launch last month. — SAM THAM/The Star

nice to feel nice, and if pleasant emotions serve the interests of our survival and reproduction. Research suggests that they do, primarily because they help to undo the effects of our unpleasant emotions.

How does culture affect our emotions?

Culture plays a significant role in shaping our emotions. At the same time, there are things we don't learn, such as the six universal expressions that exist – these are just in-built in every individual, so there's certainly a balance of both.

We can, to an extent, learn from other cultures, and we see that with young Malaysians today who are more expressive than their parents' generation. We're all from the same culture, but we also move with the times.

How do emotions shape our values?

A lot of what we consider to be moral or immoral can be tied to our emotions. Work by the psychologist Jonathan Haidt suggests that three central emotions are associated with his model of moral reasoning: contempt, anger, and disgust. Violations of how society feels you should behave trigger one of these three emotions.

Over time, we've latched on to these and other emotions, which is to say that if something's immoral, it's because it triggers some sort of unpleasant response in us.

How do our emotions change as we grow older?

There is a slight increase in emotional intelligence. This comes from experience and the fact that you accumulate wisdom through your

life experiences. This allows you to see challenges and situations more objectively as you age. While there's not such a strong connection between emotional intelligence and age, there is some research that shows a positive relationship between the two.

We do tend to rely more on emotion in the latter part of our lives, compared to when we're younger, when we can be somewhat more reactive. When we're younger, the areas of the brain that deal with social appropriation aren't really developed yet, which explains why teenagers can be impulsive and sometimes difficult. When you reach your 50s and beyond, that's when your emotions play a bigger part, and your emotional well-being becomes more of a priority.

Why is gratitude such an important emotion?

If we look at gratitude from the evolutionary perspective of reciprocity, it's the emotion that helps bind ourselves to the people around us. Gratitude helps us to remember when people have helped and cooperated with us, because that's in the interests of our survival.

You need people who you can trust and rely on, people who bring us benefits that are essential to our survival. So beyond just feeling nice, gratitude reminds us to reciprocate and to remember those who are essential to our overall well-being. It's a cohesive emotion that brings people together.

If technology could allow us to choose our emotions, how would it affect us?

Having a full range of emotions is essentially what makes us human. When we talk about psychopaths or zombies, basically the only thing that's missing is emotion. We're not sure if we'd ever want to replicate emotion, because then we wouldn't be much different from a robot.

We could perhaps treat children with autism, for example; however, because technology might allow us to play god, it doesn't mean that it would necessarily be a good thing. Every emotion has its function.

Review by SANDY CLARKE
star2@thestar.com.my

DID you know that people can experience a desire known as "cute aggression"? Or that venting our frustrations leads us to feeling more anger rather than less?

Emotions are present in almost everything we do and yet, relatively little is understood about why we feel something rather than nothing and how, exactly, we humans became so diverse in our emotional range.

Although neuroscience and research into emotions have developed significantly in recent decades, we're still very much at the tip of the iceberg when it comes to understanding the workings of the brain and the nature of consciousness. Indeed, most of us tend to use emotions, feelings and moods interchangeably, as though each term refers to the same thing. As we find out in *Of Bromances And Biting Cute Babies*, these aren't necessarily the same, and understanding each concept can lead to better self-awareness.

At a time when people are growing increasingly interested in how their minds function, this book is a timely offering by Eugene Tee, an emotions researcher, and Tsee

A timely, accessible book

Of Bromances And Biting Cute Babies: Questions About Emotions You (Probably) Never Thought Of Asking

Authors: Eugene Tee & Tsee Leng Choy
Publisher: The Inspiration Hub, nonfiction

Leng Choy, who specialises in clinical neuroscience.

Both authors are also senior lecturers at HELP University's department of psychology and came up with the idea of compiling the book after being asked a wide range of questions by their students.

The book addresses 89 questions in total in the form of short essays, which makes for easy, informative and frequently entertaining reading. Having dipped my toe into the research of emotions, I initially expected the book to present information I was already familiar with. On the contrary, *Of Bromances And*

Biting Cute Babies provides plenty of surprising facts, insights and observations that lend the book its allure.

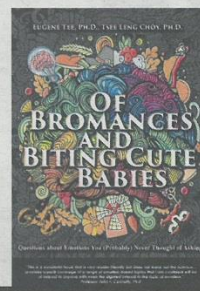
Set out in three parts, the book's first section addresses fundamental questions such as, "What are emotions?", "Are emotions the same as feelings and moods?", and "Is it possible to feel nothing?"

Part two of the book explores discrete (individual) emotions and tackles age-old questions such as why we feel fear and sadness, alongside modern queries such as whether violence and video games are correlated, and why we are drawn to horror movies and

haunted houses.

As the title suggests, we also find out why "bromances" exist, and why some people are inclined to bite cute babies or puppies. The book also explores current issues relating to emotions in nonhumans: If robots could feel, would that make them human? What about plants and dogs – do they experience emotion? The book is filled with exploratory answers that are as riveting as many of the questions.

The third part takes a practical look at living with emotions. This section explores questions to which we might feel the answers



are obvious; however, we get to find out just how nuanced and complex our emotions can be.

Questions in this segment include, "Are women more emotional than men?", "What happens when people suppress their emotions?", and "How does social media and technology influence our emotions?"

A great deal of this book's appeal is that it strikes a wonderful balance between being richly evidence-based and yet accessible to the non-academics among us. For their debut book, Tee and Choy have done a wonderful job in producing a work that leaves their audience hungry for more on their favourite topics. In that sense, *Of Bromances And Biting Cute Babies* inspires deeper learning as much as it provides the reader with an engaging investigation into our emotions.

Perhaps the most significant benefit of reading the book is that it naturally encourages self-reflection once we're armed with the valuable knowledge offered by the authors. For those new to the idea of introspection, *Of Bromances And Biting Cute Babies* will certainly open them up to an interesting and wonderful journey of self-discovery and realisation.